

Openness of comics: generating meaning with flexible structures

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Openness of Comics: Generating Meaning with Flexible Structures, by Maaheen Ahmed, Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, 224 pp., US\$60.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-496-80593-5

In this key contribution to the young field of Comics Studies, Maaheen Ahmed applies Umberto Eco's concept of 'openness' – the way in which an artist might create possibilities for multiple interpretations of their work – to comics spanning memories and biographies, adventure and superheroes, noir, black comedy and crime, fantasy and science fiction, and closing with a comparison with other forms of visual narration. Alongside Eco's non-comics-specific theories, Ahmed builds upon Francophone and Anglophone comics theories, including Thierry Groensteen's stages in the creation of fiction, Scott McCloud's thoughts on juxtaposition and sequentiality, and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle's 'complex syntagm'.

Ahmed takes as her representative sample an "often overlooked selection of American and European comics from the last five decades with the aim of showing how they often work as open texts" (3), analysing their role within visual, literary, and comics-based spheres. The works, in English, French, German and Finnish, are analysed chronologically, allowing the reader to follow the development of both the comics in their own right and Ahmed's thesis. Having considered works that sit squarely within the (albeit loose) tradition of comics form, Ahmed then extends the discussion to other strongly verbal-visual works, including illustrated novels and artists' books, finally drawing upon contemporary media and their effect on the perception of comics.

The author demonstrates that Eco's theory of the 'open' work is perfectly suited to the comics medium, particularly because of the space that comics create between the visual and the verbal, and through the reader's naturally very active role in the creation of its narrative form. Ahmed thus builds upon and expands Eco's examples and the application of his theory, while being careful to clarify that "openness is not to be confused with a complete freedom of interpretation but implies the presence of multiple, interlinked interpretations that remain linked to the work" (5-6).

Chapter One delves into fictionalized memories and biographies, exploring works of Will Eisner and Jacques Tardi that engage with the notion of, and the manipulation of, direct and indirect memory. Ahmed uses the self-reflexive features and philosophical content of these works, as well as the prominence of the tension they create between truth and fiction, to demonstrate their engagement with openness. Elaborating the subjectivity of the comics discussed in the first chapter, Chapter Two's appraisal of adventure and superhero tropes addresses works by Hugo Pratt, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and Edmond Baudouin. Notions of memory are built upon through the addition of ideas of loss and identity. Several of these works engage with visual ambiguity as well as psychological themes, lending themselves willingly to Ahmed's analysis of their openness. Ahmed also discusses the potential for openness through reuse of protagonists across different comics. The third chapter considers works by Tardi, Eddie Campbell, Marko Turunen, and Jyrki Heikkinen. Here Ahmed uses the extent to which comics engage with conventions of the crime and mystery tropes to define their degree of openness, thus determining increased openness in parallel with increased subversion of convention. Chapter Four focuses on the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction, through works by Moebius, Enki Bilal, Yslaire, Jarmo Mäkilä

that manipulate time, space, and of course technology. The analysis in this section allows Ahmed to assert that “It is through self-reflexivity, suggestive stories and images, and the presence of a solid narrative structure that openness is generated” (118). She also states that openness in comics often comes hand in hand with the transformation of comics, as well as literary and visual, techniques. The final chapter demonstrates the usefulness of other verbal-visual forms for generating openness, as well as the impact of comics that adapt literary material. These works open up the literary material by creating the possibility for multiple stories based on the original. Ahmed’s Conclusion delineates the ways in which openness can be generated in comics, namely through disjointedness, media references, “contraventions of convention” in characterization, and subversion, autofiction, metafiction.

Certain aspects of the book could be clearer. For instance, the Introduction refers to three parts, where the book is officially divided into five chapters. Equally, a dedicated images section is inserted into the text (between Chapters Four and Five), but this is not particularly clearly referenced earlier. The collation itself is useful for comparison’s sake, but earlier referencing would be helpful. The Introduction and Conclusion are stylistically clear and insightful. The chapters provide excellent analyses of the works, but could be more committal on defining comics as open or closed. Nonetheless Ahmed’s progression in each chapter from closedness to openness is well appreciated, and also ensures that the work does not succumb to the assumption that all comics are essentially open to openness. The chapters and their subsections are extremely clearly signposted, and the writing style makes for an enjoyable read. This text will have important impact on Comics Studies in English, and is recommended particularly for postgraduates and more established academics.

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